

Marriage vs. Cohabitation – The Dilemma of a Choice

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Abstract

In recent decades, in several countries, including Romania, changes have been observed regarding the evolution and development of relationships between conjugal partners. Whereas in the past the norm dictated that conjugal partners should marry in order to live together and have children - with any alternative being deemed inappropriate - nowadays both marriage and cohabitation represent forms of civil union. The period during which two conjugal partners form a couple and/or live together has significantly increased, with consensual union becoming an increasingly popular alternative to marriage. The aim of this paper revolves around a dilemma that has become increasingly evident in young people's decision to live together: "What is the main life choice of young people: marriage or cohabitation?" In this regard, the paper will focus on identifying the characteristics of each type of relationship, analyzing the differences and similarities between the two, and presenting their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, by analyzing the responses provided by the selected group, I intend to identify the ways in which the two forms of conjugal cohabitation affect both the individual on a personal level and society from social, economic, religious, and emotional perspectives.

Keywords: *Marriage; concubinage; cohabitation; functionality; gender.*

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1. From Marriage to Consensual Union

In Romania, marriage is defined as the union between a man and a woman. Marriage is a universally encountered institution, as it exists in all societies and cultures in one form or another. It differs from other human relationships, such as friendships or other familial ties, through the public formalization of the couple's relationship, the respected status among other members of society, and the serious and long-term commitment through which offspring are legitimized. In cases where there is a desire to annul the marriage, divorce is permitted in most countries, though it is not encouraged or promoted in any of them, as it is considered the opposite of the ideal norm (Pastuh, 2018). In the fields of sociology and demography, marriage represents the first stage of family life and plays an essential and influential role in other demographic events: fertility and birth rates (Voinea, 2005).

In Romania, a significant increase in the number of marriages has been observed; in 2021, 114,207 marriages were registered, with a nuptiality rate of 5.2 per one thousand inhabitants, compared to 3.7 in the previous year (Pisica, 2022).

The decision to marry may be motivated by various reasons, such as social ones (public opinion, adherence to social norms, legitimacy of future children), personal ones (social status offered by marriage, increased compatibility between partners, the desire to follow one's parents' example), economic ones (shared property, acquisition of material goods, financial advantages provided by the state), or religious reasons (union before God, obtaining parish recognition).

Marriage is one of the oldest social institutions and, in most cases, the foundation upon which the family is built. The ultimate goal of marriage as a social institution is stability, with the couple being concerned with achieving economic unity and the ability to care for offspring. The contractual relationship between the couple and the state is a public one and consists of fulfilling the aforementioned requirements. In the private sphere, however, additional rules and expectations may exist between the members of the couple, facilitating their entry into the civil institution (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006). With the formalization of the relationship, the spouses acquire a new social status, both individually and as a couple. They begin to be seen as a family, and the level of respect they receive from society increases significantly. Precisely because of this status, the motivation behind the decision to marry may stem from the pressure

felt from society. This situation is especially common among women. Despite the fact that, with the evolution and modernization of society, the moral sanctions from its members are no longer as harsh toward unmarried women, they still exist and may represent a significant deciding factor. However, this new status also comes with responsibilities. Upon marriage, it is expected that the couple will grow their family by having children.

The most common motivational factor in the decision to marry is the desire to start a family. As previously mentioned, marriage constitutes the first stage in founding a family. Through this act, the couple leaves their family of origin and forms their own conjugal family by formalizing the relationship both legally - through civil marriage - and religiously - through the religious ceremony. Now, the two acquire a new place in society, along with new statuses and responsibilities.

The family of origin can be a decisive factor both in the decision to marry and in the choice of partner. In traditional societies, parents played a much more important role in the marriage process, often choosing the age at which children married and the future spouse based on various criteria: the girl's dowry, wealth, education, relationships between the potential in-laws, social status, etc. (Voinea, 2005). In contemporary societies, parents no longer have a decisive role (except in some cultures, such as those in Asia), but they can still influence and guide their children. However, differences in mentality between the parents' generation and that of the children - amplified by the parents' desire to secure the best possible partner for their child - can lead to conflict (Apostu, 2016).

Throughout history, single and unmarried individuals have been discriminated against and regarded as a burden on families, with their traits being associated with negative characteristics, unlike those of married individuals. Given that the purpose of human beings is to procreate, and the social norm dictates that a couple must be married in order to legitimize their offspring, individuals who surpass a certain age threshold without being married may be discriminated against or pitied by members of society. This scenario applies especially to women: *"the destiny that society traditionally proposes for a woman is marriage."* (Beauvoir, 2022). Even though in contemporary societies being a single woman is no longer as heavily judged, part of the traditional mentality still persists. Especially as they grow older, unmarried women are often regarded with pity by those around them.

Marriage is seen as a natural step in our personal development, a universally valid social norm that most of us expect to fulfill. Being such a common aspect of humanity, when it is not fulfilled by someone - particularly when that person has passed a certain age - society begins to question the possible reasons behind this fact (Morris, Sinclair, DePaulo, 2007). In a study presented in the article "*She's single, so what? How are singles perceived compared with people who are married,*" the results showed that single individuals are perceived by society as being less loving, caring, responsible, and mature than married individuals. However, single individuals as a result of divorce or the death of a partner do not receive the same treatment as those who are not in a relationship at all, as society tends to show compassion toward them (Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, Stucke, 2007).

The nuclear family is where we develop as individuals, where norms, values, and behavioral patterns necessary for social integration are transmitted, and where parents serve as the first role models for their children. The dynamic of the relationship between them can influence a child's expectations of a future conjugal partner. Likewise, attitudes toward the institution of marriage and the ways in which a conjugal couple expresses and organizes itself are first formed within the nuclear family, based on the information parents pass on to their children.

Parental mentality plays an important role in decisions regarding the personal lives of children, including the decision to marry. Traditions and social norms are passed down from generation to generation and are seen as the only appropriate courses of action in order to avoid socially undesirable behavior and, implicitly, moral sanction by the community. For example, in many societies - including Romanian society - having a child outside of marriage is considered an undesirable act, suggesting both a failure on the part of the parents to teach their children socially accepted behavioral patterns and an indication of instability and lack of responsibility within the couple.

Although in contemporary societies such cases are significantly more common and are no longer as harshly criticized socially as they were in traditional societies, having an illegitimate child still constitutes a deviation from the social norm. For instance, if in an unmarried couple the girl becomes pregnant, the parents' tendency is to urge her toward marriage in order to avoid the "*gossip*" of acquaintances and the shame that may fall both on the mother, for the way she raised her child, and on the daughter, for her act.

Marriage under such circumstances is referred to as an imposed marriage. To prevent this situation, girls from conservative cultures tend to avoid living together with their partner before marriage (Gault-Sherman & Draper, 2012).

According to the gender specialization theory, or the “*gains-to-marriage theory*” promoted by Gary Becker, the choice of a life partner is based on economic characteristics. Both men and women choose the person they will marry by considering a trade of complementary resources specific to each gender. In this sense, men’s contribution to the exchange is financial capital, so their probability of marrying is influenced by their economic potential. Women, on the other hand, contribute by giving birth, raising children, and maintaining the household. Even though most women today are employed, their economic potential is not as significant on the marriage market (Peterson & Bush, 2013).

In the past, the deciding factor in marriage was not love between the two individuals, but rather economic or political considerations. Marriage was an act with more economic than social or romantic significance. Few marriages were based on the feelings shared between partners. At that time, marriage could be a means of acquiring wealth, elevating social status, or increasing the economic, social, and political influence of two families.

Today, although diminished, such practices can still be found, especially in traditional societies, where love does not always represent a decisive criterion in the decision to formalize a marriage. However, the forms are more lenient, as many arranged marriages are not forced, and both partners give their consent. Also, marriage for the purpose of acquiring wealth should not be excluded from modern and democratic societies either. Two sources of income provide more stability in a household than one alone.

In many cultures, including Romanian culture, the wedding is not only an event through which two people in love bind their destinies for life, but it also carries an economic dimension. Wedding guests typically give the couple monetary gifts (usually directly proportional to the closeness of their relationship) meant to cover the cost of the event and help the newlyweds start their family life.

The Romanian state does not impose a religion. According to Article 29 (5) of the Constitution, “*Religious denominations are autonomous from the state and enjoy its support, including by facilitating religious assistance in the army, in hospitals, in penitentiaries, in homes for the elderly, and in orphanages.*” Nevertheless, Romania falls within the sphere of Christianity, with

over 85% of the population being Eastern Orthodox Christians, according to the National Institute of Statistics.

The institution of marriage belongs to both the secular and the sacred realm. Christians believe that the theological, sacred aspect of marriage takes precedence over its secular dimension in order to understand the mystery and uniqueness of Christian marriage (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006). In traditional, conservative thinking, the uniting of two lives before God is necessary in order not to live in sin. In the natural course of a person's life, starting a family marks maturity and the beginning of adult life, when one leaves their family of origin and forms their own household. This stage is marked in Christianity by the religious marriage ceremony, as mentioned in Genesis 2:24: "*a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*" The foundation of the covenant between partners is companionship, loyalty, and mutual support. Between husband and wife, a commitment is formed based on the same kind of love that binds God to the world (Lawler, 1985, apud Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006).

Beyond the most common reason for marriage - love - there are situations in which the formalization of a union between two people is either a condition of employment or brings significant benefits within that context. For example, in the Orthodox religion, which is predominant in Romania, men who have completed theological studies and wish to become priests and obtain a parish must be married beforehand, as marriage will not be permitted afterward. The reason for this requirement is that it is mandated by the canons (church laws). A priest must be married and understand the mysteries of marriage in order to be able to advise and help married people in times of need. Additionally, the obligation of marriage is intended to help the priest better focus on his mission, without being tempted or distracted.

Concubinage represents either a stage preceding marriage or an alternative to it. In the specialized literature, this form of cohabitation may appear under various terms, such as "*living together unmarried,*" "*quasi-marriage,*" "*trial marriage,*" "*cohabitation,*" and "*non-conjugal cohabitation*" (Cole, 1977, apud Yollo, 1978).

Apart from the legal aspect, there are no significant differences between a couple living in concubinage and a married couple, as both fulfill the functions of the family and face the same obstacles (Voinea, 2005). Consensual union is an increasingly common practice in contemporary societies, especially in American society, but it is also gaining popularity among European ones. For

most people who experience it, this form of cohabitation does not lead to a decrease in marriage rates but rather to its postponement, since individuals living in consensual unions tend to marry at older ages than those who do not cohabit (Bower & Christopherson, 1977, apud Newcomb; Bentler, 1980).

The changes in the structures and values promoted by the traditional family are driven by the ongoing evolution and modernization of societies. Today, we can observe the deinstitutionalization of marriage from two perspectives: behavioral and legislative (Roussel, 1989, apud Apostu, 2018). As the educational system develops, along with contraceptive methods and knowledge about them, the increased involvement of women in the labor market, and the general improvement in living conditions, there are also changes in people's views, attitudes, and behaviors regarding family formation (Bumpass, 1990, apud Gubernskaya, 2010).

In Romania, according to the 2011 census, 757.5 thousand people declared that they live in a consensual union, representing approximately 3.8% of the population. In the Romanian mentality, living in concubinage is not seen as a valid way to formalize a conjugal relationship (Apostu, 2018).

Marriage is a major commitment that requires a high level of maturity from the couple. Therefore, consensual cohabitation as a premeditative stage before marriage is a form of cohabitation that can facilitate the most suitable choice of a future life partner, based on the conjugal functionality experienced during that period.

Since the family of origin plays a role in preparing us for integration into society, each individual develops a personal set of values, norms, attitudes, ways of thinking, and modes of organization acquired from the environment in which they were raised. If these sets are divergent or if there are too many differences, the stability of the couple may decrease, potentially leading to separation. Therefore, consensual cohabitation can be an option for testing the compatibility between two people, and if the outcome is not favorable, separation will be easier than in the case of a married couple. The way the household, budget, and free time are organized are factors that should be discussed and tested within a couple before marriage. Disagreements regarding these aspects can lead to conflicts (Ghebre, 1999).

Another aspect that should be discussed by the couple before making the decision to marry, in order to avoid destabilizing the relationship in the future, is whether both partners are oriented toward

career or toward family life. Nowadays, orientation toward career and education is becoming increasingly important for both men and women. Oppenheimer's economic search theory highlights the postponement of marriage due to a focus on career development. In this process, men tend to delay marriage until they believe they have the necessary stability to support a family. According to Oppenheimer, the decision to marry is the result of an analysis of career maturity and the economic potential of a possible partner. Career maturity is defined by having a stable job and sufficient income to support a household. Currently, the process of achieving career maturity is significantly longer for both genders, which also extends the period of marriage postponement. According to the economic search theory, cohabitation is an option to cope with the costly process of financial development. Thus, consensual union is a means through which the couple can get to know each other better, benefiting from the comfort and intimacy that cohabitation provides, until they reach career maturity and are able to marry without experiencing financial strain (Peterson & Bush, 2013).

Another factor that positions concubinage as a premeditative stage before marriage is the age of the couple's members, which may not yet be advanced enough to legally facilitate the formalization of their union. For example, two people may form a couple as early as high school, and even if there is a desire to marry, being minors, this is not legally possible. In Romania, the legislation stipulates that the minimum age for marriage is 18 for men and 16 for women.

The legal aspect is not the only age-related factor that may determine concubinage as a preparatory stage for marriage. Maturity, life experience, and intelligence are elements that favor the postponement of the marital decision. Much like the well-known saying "*one learns as long as one lives,*" every experience we go through - be it positive or negative - helps us grow as individuals and better understand both ourselves and the world around us.

Moreover, as we grow older, our level of maturity increases, making us more capable of making rational, fact-based decisions rather than emotional ones. Youth bring with it enthusiasm and a strong desire to experience as much as possible as quickly as possible, which often leads us to overlook the virtue of patience and rush into the unknown. This lack of knowledge and experience, characteristic of early age, can lead to conjugal failure: "*in the vast majority of cases, the unfortunate effects of marriages concluded at a very young age are undeniable*" (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939).

Financial stability can be a well-founded reason for postponing marriage and extending the period of consensual union. The desire to be independent and succeed without parental support is a trait specific to modern youth. It is self-evident that most young people do not have high incomes, especially during university or immediately afterward. Accepting money from parents may come with certain expectations on their part and feelings of indebtedness on the part of the children. For example, if the parents are the ones covering the wedding expenses of the young couple, they may have expectations and demands regarding the organization of the event, the guests, the couple's attire, the décor, etc., which can lead to conflicts if their views do not align with those of the couple.

One of the reasons couples may opt for consensual union instead of a legal contract is the need for autonomy and freedom. Despite the fact that women are increasingly socialized to pursue higher education and successful careers, the responsibility for maintaining the household and raising children still largely falls on them.

Consensual union as an alternative form of cohabitation is one of the causes for the decline of the institution of marriage, both in European and American culture. The trends that have facilitated the decline in the cultural and institutional predominance of marriage in contemporary societies include increasing indifference and dissatisfaction toward marriage among those eligible to marry, as well as the emergence of non-traditional families (same-sex couples) who wish to marry but do not have that right (Weiner, 2007). Aspirations toward a long-lasting and high-quality connection between two people encourage an evaluative process of the relationship's quality. The compatibility of the couple can be tested through cohabitation since, unlike marriage, it allows for more flexibility and a simpler termination of the relationship in the case of incompatibility. Therefore, the process of cohabitation can serve to test whether the current life partner is the right one, providing the freedom necessary to better discover both the person beside us and ourselves (Jamieson, Anderson, McCrone, Bechofer, Stewart, Li, 2002).

Despite the fact that consensual union can be a preparatory stage before marriage, social reality shows that more and more couples choose to remain in this state for the rest of their lives. One reason may be convenience. If a significant period of time passes during which a couple lives in concubinage, they may grow accustomed to their current cohabitation style and no longer view a legal contract as important. Moreover, unlike marriage, partners no

longer feel compelled to stay together in the name of an external principle, an institution, or a moral or societal norm (Singly, 1993, apud Apostu, 2018).

Concubinage may represent an alternative to marriage not necessarily due to the couple's desire to remain in this stage, but because of the impossibility of formalizing the relationship, both legally and religiously. This is also the case for same-sex couples. In Europe, only 17 countries have legalized same-sex marriage: Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. However, more and more European countries are becoming increasingly tolerant toward non-traditional families and are thus recognizing same-sex couples and legalizing concubinage between them: Andorra, Greece, Italy, Cyprus. There are still, however, countries that have not legalized the union of two individuals in any form: Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Vatican City. Despite the fact that since the 21st century, public attitudes have become more open and tolerant toward the LGBT community, a significant number of countries - both in Europe and on other continents - have not legalized same-sex marriage. For this reason, such couples face restrictions on their conjugal choices and are left with consensual union as an alternative to marriage.

Romania has traditionally been one of the more conservative countries and attempted through the 2018 referendum to amend Article 48 of the Constitution in order to explicitly define the family as consisting of a man and a woman, replacing the more general term "*spouses*." However, due to voter absenteeism and the referendum's association with a political party, it failed to achieve its objective.

Conjugal partners may also opt for concubinage as an alternative to marriage when they belong to different religions and neither - or only one - is willing to renounce their own faith. In such cases, the relationship may only be formalized legally, or one of the partners must convert to the other's religion. If both individuals wish to preserve their religious values, they may choose consensual union.

2. Methodology

The study employed a quantitative research method, using a convenience sample consisting of unmarried women and unmarried men aged between 18 and 29. Within the 18-34 age range, the proportion of married men is 67.83%, while the proportion of married

women is 76.46%. This age range includes both individuals who intend to marry and those who decide not to. This social category was chosen with the intention of observing individuals below the nuptiality peak (18-29 years) in order to identify their decision regarding consensual union - as an alternative to legal marriage or as a premarital stage for those postponing marriage.

Given that contemporary society shows an increasingly confirmed tendency toward autonomy, I aim to identify how the idea of non-marital conjugality is shaped by gender and age.

The main objective of this research is to identify young people's preferred way of living. Two working hypotheses are associated with this objective: *“Although individuals agree with concubinage, their main option remains marriage.”* and *“The higher the age category, the more desirable consensual union becomes.”*

3. Concubinage or Marriage – Contemporary Dilemmas

The general analysis of frequencies reveals that the majority of respondents (80.2%) do not consider marriage to be a defining element in the formation of a family. Regarding the age of the respondents, despite the fact that in all three age groups (19-21, 22-24, 25-29), the majority of responses (over 80%) suggest that the idea of family is defined by functionality and the cohesion of its members rather than by the legal attestation of what constitutes a family - through civil marriage - the age categories confirm this: the younger the respondent, the more likely they are to believe that marriage is not essential to legitimizing the idea of family. Moreover, as age increases, traditional influences become stronger.

It can be observed that in the first age group (19-21), a higher percentage of individuals answered “Yes” compared to the other two age groups. This may be attributed to the respondents' still-young age. As young adults, most individuals in the 19-21 age range do not yet consider marriage and starting a family, unlike those who are a few years older.

From the perspective of background, there is a significant difference in the acceptance of the idea that a family can be perceived as such even without marriage, between respondents from urban areas and those from rural areas. Although in both categories the majority of respondents believe that a family can exist without marriage, 85.7% of urban respondents answered “Yes,” compared to 68.8% of those from rural areas. Although rural mentalities are no longer as traditional as in the past, the results presented in the contingency table suggest a slight persistence of traditional values.

If within the 19–21 age group, 85.4% of individuals intend to marry, among those aged 22–24 the percentage drops to 80%, and in the 25–29 group it decreases further to 78.6%. This may, to some extent, be attributed to the maturation process, as with increased life experience, people tend to adopt a more rational perspective on marriage, in contrast to the idealized view typical of younger individuals. On the other hand, people from the age of 22 may have other priorities and areas of personal life on which to focus, such as career or personal development, which may push the intention to marry into the background.

From a gender perspective, a difference can be observed between women's and men's intentions to marry. Although both sexes show a majority intention to marry, women responded in a higher proportion than men that they wish to get married (86.4% compared to 74.2%).

This aspect may be attributed to the social pressure placed on women - the idea that an unmarried woman is unfulfilled or undesirable. As a result, the strong intention to marry may suggest a greater willingness to conform to societal expectations, whereas for men it remains more of a personal preference, as they are not subjected to the same social norms.

This correlation indicates that the intention to marry correlates negatively with viewing concubinage as a permanent way of life. The correlation is statistically significant, with a significance coefficient of .001, and it reveals a moderate negative association, with a Pearson coefficient of $-.354$. Thus, individuals who intend to marry are less likely to consider concubinage/consensual union as a permanent lifestyle. Therefore, for these individuals, concubinage/consensual union may represent, at most, a preparatory stage before marriage, not an alternative to it, as marriage remains the preferred form of cohabitation in long-term relationships.

Between the intention to marry and the desire to live in permanent concubinage without marriage, there is a medium-level negative correlation. From a statistical point of view, it is significant, as $\text{Sig} = .000$, and the negative value is indicated by the Pearson coefficient, which is $-.529$. The interpretation of this correlation is the following: individuals who intend to marry would not wish to live in permanent concubinage. Consequently, for them, the institution of marriage is important and viewed as a formal commitment that legalizes the relationship in the eyes of the state and society, in contrast to permanent cohabitation.

A contingency table reveals the prevailing social perception regarding differences in the level of involvement and commitment between a couple living in concubinage and a married couple. Despite the fact that the majority opinion (over 50%) in all three age groups is that there are no significant differences, the notable number of people in each age group who disagree cannot be ignored. Furthermore, there is a slight increase in the percentage of those who believe there are fundamental differences between cohabiting and married couples as age increases. If those aged 19–21 have not yet accumulated sufficient relational experience of commitment and emotional engagement to evaluate possible differences (38.6%), those in the older age group, 25–29 years, as a result of personal experiences and deeper understanding of romantic relationships, show a higher percentage (47.1%) in considering that there are differences in involvement and commitment.

There are also differences in opinions between genders. A higher percentage of women (42%) believe that there are significant differences in the level of involvement and commitment between a married couple and a cohabiting one, compared to men (38.2%).

If in the past, the social norm dictated that a couple should not live together before marriage, today this is increasingly common, as highlighted by the very low percentages for the response options “*to a great extent*” and “*to a very great extent*”: in the 19–21 age group 4%, in the 22–24 age group 2.4%, and in the 25–29 age group 5.9%. The image of consensual union and romantic experience is no longer widely seen as sinful, except in exceptional cases.

Moreover, from the perspective of the environment of origin, a difference can be observed between the percentage of respondents from urban areas and those from rural areas. The latter show a percentage of 16.7% in agreement with the statement “*It is a sin for a couple to live together without being married*”, as opposed to the former, who show a percentage of 2.2%. This result may be due to the greater influence that religion has over members of rural communities. Often being small communities, people are closer to each other, and the Church still plays an important role in the social and cultural aspects of the community.

Regarding the choice of a conjugal partner, parents have a strong influence in this process if they have a close relationship with their children. The closer the relationship with the parents, the more likely it is that children will, unconsciously, seek partners who resemble them. Families of origin influence children, and the controlling tendency of parents - those who consider themselves

close to their children - actually results in children forming decisions not only by reflecting on conjugal compatibility and functionality, but also through consultation and feedback from their parents. In this way, parents help shape the decision of conjugal partnership. Furthermore, even the relationship between the parents can become an example or aspiration for their children. Often, girls look for traits of their father in their future partner, and boys seek traits of their mother.

From the perspective of age, the adjacent table clearly illustrates the influence of close friends on preferred forms of cohabitation. According to the well-known saying "*Birds of a feather flock together*", friends in one's close circle can have a strong influence on how individuals choose to live.

The youngest respondents, aged between 19 and 21, believe that it is not necessarily important for a child to be born into a married couple - specifically, 60.9% of them. The responses of those aged 22–24 indicate a view similar to that of the younger group; however, the percentage of those who answered "Yes" to the statement, namely 48.7%, is almost equal to that of those who disagreed, namely 51.3%. In the 25–29 age group, the ratio between those who responded affirmatively and those who responded negatively is balanced, with 50 percent in each category.

The importance placed on marriage before having children correlates positively with unplanned pregnancy being a reason for marriage. The correlation is statistically significant, as Sig = .000, and the Pearson coefficient is .406, indicating a moderate association.

Therefore, through this correlation it can be explained that individuals who believe it is important for a couple to be married before having children are more likely to consider unplanned pregnancy a reason for marriage. A child entails a greater level of responsibility than the individual interests of the partners. For the security of the child, they are willing to sacrifice their desire for autonomy or to postpone marriage. Moreover, the reasons behind this decision may be social: fear of being judged for having a child outside of marriage; religious: in Orthodox Christianity it is considered a sin; economic: benefits provided by the state to married couples with newborns; or cultural: the desire for the woman and child to bear the father's surname.

According to the contingency table, analyzing the perspective based on environment of origin, a significant difference can be observed in the distribution of responses between respondents from urban areas and those from rural areas.

Thus, we can observe that respondents from urban areas totally agree that a wedding offers an important status to marital partners and grants social recognition to the relationship in a proportion of 19.4%, while respondents from rural areas totally agree in a proportion of 38.9%, showing that traditional imperatives have not faded and are still strongly present in rural life. The importance of the wedding at the level of reference communities remains high. At the community level, validation is achieved not only through legal recognition, but also through the assumption of cultural elements: most young people still observe specific traditions and rituals of traditional life (specific songs, dances, processions depending on cultural regions, etc.).

All these elements validate marriage not only from the perspective of the reference group (relatives, friends) but also from the perspective of the entire community.

According to the contingency table, a large portion of respondents agree that a wedding expresses full commitment from the partners.

Thus, we can observe that respondents aged between 19–21 completely agree with the above statement (42%), while those aged between 22–24 somewhat agree (40.5%), whereas respondents aged between 25–29 somewhat disagree (29.4%). Therefore, it can be noted that the belief that marriage represents a full commitment of the partners decreases as people grow older. This may be the result of life and relationship experiences accumulated over the years.

From the analysis of the results, it is identified that 42% of those aged 19–21 strongly agree with the concept of consensual union. Furthermore, within this same age group, 2% of total respondents agree to a lesser extent. For the 22–24 age category, the trend is upward - individuals resonate to a greater or lesser extent with consensual cohabitation, and those aged 25–29 are in the same position.

From the age perspective, it can be observed that 58.3% of the total respondents consider consensual union or cohabitation as a possible form of permanent living. For all three age segments, the responses were predominantly affirmative - 56.1% for those aged 19–21 and 60% for the 22–24 and 25–29 categories.

As young people grow older, they become accustomed to the idea of autonomy and their level of tolerance increases. Thus, as conjugal experience builds, the tendency to accept a relationship, regardless of its legal status, increases.

From the perspective of age, 65.3% of the total survey group would not live in a permanent consensual union without getting married. The observed trend is a general disagreement with this way of living across all age categories, but especially within the 25–29 age group, where the percentage of negative responses is 73.3%.

Individuals who consider freedom and autonomy as the main reasons for cohabitation are most likely to share the same view regarding career focus. In this way, partners can advance in their careers to the desired level of fulfillment while also enjoying the specific intimacies of conjugal life, but without fully assuming family roles. The tendency of partners to prioritize personal fulfillment before shared fulfillment is increasingly evident.

Through the positive correlation between disbelief in the institution of marriage and the values of freedom and autonomy, consensual union can be seen as an alternative to marriage. The correlation is statistically significant (Sig.=.000), positive, and of medium strength (Pearson Correlation = .557).

In this sense, it can be concluded that individuals who have low confidence in marriage as an institution are highly likely to value freedom and autonomy in a romantic relationship. For them, marriage is merely an act that restricts personal freedom and dictates certain behavioral and functional patterns. Some arguments are stereotypical regarding the reduction of freedom within marriage, but on the other hand, they can be justified, as marriage still bears low-intensity traditional imperatives, which is why there is a sense of obligation to do what must be done within marriage.

Considering the gender distribution regarding disbelief in marriage, 28% of women fully agreed with this statement, compared to 17.1% of men. Thus, the woman ends up assuming roles she does not desire, as she senses that society is still somewhat traditional, and women's burden of responsibility is greater - this is why she tends to push this responsibility away.

More than half of the respondents (55.2%) believe that living in cohabitation may lead to the loss of various social benefits that a married couple would otherwise enjoy.

In this regard, a slight decrease in percentages can be observed across age segments. While 57.1% of respondents aged 19–21 agree with the above statement, the percentage drops to 55.3% for those aged 22–24 and to 50% for those aged 25–29.

The percentage of men who believe that social perception significantly influences the decision to marry or cohabit is half that of women (23.5% compared to 46.6%). Social imperatives are more

strongly felt by women than by men. Unmarried women who live in cohabitation for extended periods are judged more harshly by society for this choice, unlike men, who are not subjected to the same treatment. Therefore, women are more inclined to choose marriage as a means of adapting to socially imposed norms.

Nevertheless, women agree with the idea that the easier possibility of separation is a benefit of cohabitation in a significantly higher percentage than men (46.7% women and 28.6% men). This difference may reflect the fact that women's need for autonomy is greater than that of men, and women want to avoid being labeled as "divorced women." A separation from a partner will not affect a woman's reputation and social perception as negatively as a divorce would. Individuals see cohabitation as an opportunity to live as they wish, free from cultural imperatives that evaluate and censor them, unlike in marriage, where expectations are standardized.

4. Conclusions

It is undeniable that in recent decades, consensual union has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in contemporary society, with a significant number of people choosing cohabitation as a permanent way of living, and it being legalized in some countries.

From the analysis of the questionnaire responses, it can be observed that tolerance towards cohabitation has significantly increased. Young people believe that a family can exist without marriage, that there are significant benefits to cohabitation, and that it can represent a permanent way of life. Nevertheless, the same individuals also acknowledge, to a considerable extent, that commitment is greater within marriage than in cohabitation. Therefore, tolerance towards cohabitation does not necessarily translate into their direct choice in terms of life commitment, long-term cohabitation, or the decision to have children.

Contradictory elements appear regarding the perception of cohabitation as a permanent lifestyle. Although at first it seems that young people do not perceive fundamental differences between the two forms of affirming a conjugal relationship, responses to certain questions reflect the exact opposite. In their perception, marriage implies a higher level of involvement and commitment compared to cohabitation. Thus, we can speak of two types of behavior: the behavior of those showing openness towards consensual union versus the actual decision of each individual - who may show high tolerance towards cohabitation but still prioritize marriage.

Therefore, despite the fact that tolerance among young people regarding permanent cohabitation has significantly increased, marriage remains the primary option for conjugal life, while cohabitation is seen more as a premarital phase rather than a true alternative to marriage.

In conclusion, following the analysis of the specialized literature and the responses to the questionnaire questions, it can be stated that this study has achieved its goal of answering the research question and fulfilling its proposed objectives, and the hypotheses have been confirmed.

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